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CIA seems spooked by plot on pope

By Donald Neff
and Roger Fontaine
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Despite mounting evidence that the Bulgarian secret services had a direct hand in the 1981 assassination attempt on Pope John Paul II, there are widespread reports that the Central Intelligence Agency and the Reagan administration continue to show a reluctance to pursue the explosive matter.

The voluminous findings of Italian state prosecutor Antonio Albano detailing the Bulgarian connection have been appearing in U.S. newspapers for the past 10 days. Yet a survey of present and former American officials with intimate knowledge of the intelligence community strongly indicates that the CIA remains unmoved and unconvinced.

One major exception to this generally critical response was lodged by former CIA Director Stansfield Turner, who cautioned that "nobody knows what the CIA is thinking. It's secret. That's its nature."

If the agency has indeed been inactive, as most sources report, the reasons could be numerous, ranging from an aloof attitude of "it's an Italian affair" to a belief that the story is just too bizarre to be true, to apprehensions that more revelations would destroy the CIA's gentlemen's agreement with the Soviet intelligence community.

Yet the incident could go to the heart of the nature of America's relationship with the Soviet Union. For instance, Mr. Albano now believes that the Soviet Union had urged or acquiesced in having the Bulgarians plot to assassinate the pope in order to combat the Solidarity trade union and the Catholic Church in Poland.

The pope's death would have had a profound effect in his native Poland, no doubt destabilizing and perhaps even destroying the largely Catholic Solidarity uprising. The pope had become a rallying point for Polish anti-communists long before the assassination was attempted May 13, 1981.

He was shot and seriously wounded by a Turkish gunman, Mehmet Ali Agca, who has since provided details about being hired by Bulgarian agents to commit the deed. It was on the basis of a year-long interrogation of Agca that the Italian judicial authorities conducted an exhaustive investigation of the assassination plot.

Their conclusion, as expressed in Mr. Albano's still secret 78-page report filed May 8 in court, was that Bulgarian agents promised Agca more than \$400,000 to commit the crime. Though the report makes no specific mention of the Soviet Union, Mr. Albano strongly suggested to the Associated Press yesterday that he believed Moscow had a hand in it.

"Do you think Bulgaria could do this sort of thing without Moscow's agreement?" he asked.

Despite these revelations, a number of sources told The Washington

Times the CIA has been and remains largely indifferent to the investigation of the Bulgarian connection.

A former high CIA official who declined to be identified said flatly:

"There's no doubt about it. The agency has not taken the Bulgarian connection seriously."

Equally outspoken has been Sen. Alfonse M. D'Amato, a New York Democrat, who, according to a Wall Street Journal story late last year,

returned from a visit to the Vatican in early 1983 and said at a press conference: "The CIA has conducted a war of silence, obstruction, and disinformation in this investigation." He called the CIA's conduct "shockingly inept."

Sen. D'Amato was reported yesterday to still hold those views.

A retired diplomat with close intelligence ties who asked not to be identified said his impression is that the CIA is doing its best to ignore the whole incident and its portentous implications. One of the reasons, he speculated, was intriguing:

"The CIA has an absolute fixation on the gentleman's agreement with the KGB [roughly, the Soviet equivalent of the CIA] about who you shoot and who you don't shoot."

"The old ground rules were very clear. Both sides could play around however they wanted to in Africa or Asia, but there was complete immunity on persons of political importance to each side. I would have thought this would have included the pope."

He speculated that if the old ground rules are indeed broken, then that is a momentous event for the CIA.

"I think they don't want to think about it," he said. "I assume they are shaken, concerned that the old rules have shifted, worried about what that really means in the world of international intrigue."

The former high CIA official had other reasons why the agency might not take the Bulgarian connection seriously.

"One, they got scooped and they are sore-headed about it," he said, alluding to the fact that the news organizations have appeared to be developing the story faster than intelligence services.

"Two, they don't have good contacts in Italy in this case. Their con-

tacts there are in intelligence, but it was the judicial system that conducted the investigation.

"And three, they've been overly skeptical because the assassination attempt was so amateurish. They kept saying to themselves that pros wouldn't do it like this."

"Well, pros do do it like that sometimes."

An official still in government who has access to intelligence data on the case but who refused to be identified said the CIA still has not devoted enough assets to it, and shows no signs of doing so.

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